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Echo and Narcissus in Victorian Poetry

JAMES WILLIAMS

The story of Echo and Narcissus comes in the latter part of Book III of the *Metamorphoses*, and is really two tragically intersecting stories. First comes Narcissus, the son borne by the nymph Liriope raped by the river-god Cephisus. When Liriope asks the seer Tiresias whether her child will live to an old age, she receives the cryptic reply *si se non noverit* (348)[1]—'if he does not know himself'. Narcissus grows to be extraordinarily beautiful, courted by both boys and girls (*multi. . . iuvenes, multae. . . puellae* (355)) but coldly resists all sexual advances. At the age of sixteen, while hunting deer, he encounters the nymph Echo. When we first meet her she still has a body but is already described as *resonabilis Echo* (358), 'resounding' (or 're-sounding') Echo, who 'could neither hold her peace when others spoke, nor yet begin to speak till others had addressed her'. She can neither initiate utterance of her own, nor stop herself repeating the last words spoken by others: *tantum haec in fine loquendi / ingeminat voces auditaque verba reportat* (368-9). This curse was a punishment from Juno for keeping her talking while her husband Jove sexually pursued nymphs (a detail that recalls Liriope's fate).

The story of 'Echo and Narcissus', properly speaking, emerges from line 370, when they first meet. 'Inflamed with love', Echo follows Narcissus. He cries *ecquis adest?* (380), 'is anybody here?' to which Echo responds *adest*, 'here!'. When she reaches out to embrace him, he spurns her: *ante* [. . .] *emoriar, quam sit tibi copia nostri* (391), 'may I die before I give you power over me!' Echo replies *sit tibi copia nostri!* (391), 'I give you power over me!' After this, she withdraws into wild places, among foliage, in caves, and on mountain-sides, her body wasting away until she becomes only bones and a voice, and then (her bones turning to stone) only voice. Narcissus, meanwhile, spurns one lover too many, and the goddess Nemesis, in answer to the prayer of a jilted youth, decides that he shall also experience unrequited love. Narcissus comes across a *fons* (407), a brightly reflective body of water variously translated 'spring', 'pool', or 'fountain'. Tired from hunting, he lies down and, catching sight of his reflection, is so overcome with desire that he cannot move. Hanging motionless over the water he wastes away to nothing, and it is at this point, as he is losing his

terrible beauty, that Echo returns. It is not clear whether she still feels desire for him. What is clear is that she takes pity on him and stays with him as he dies, repeating the last three things he says: 'alas!', 'alas, dear boy, vainly beloved!', and 'farewell!'. When his grieving sisters, the Naiads, collect Narcissus's body for burial, they find it gone except for the flower which bears his name.

The story of Narcissus in the *Metamorphoses* can be regarded as paradigmatic, but Ovid is not the only ancient source for the tale.[2] Alternatives are few, however: the other version that a well-educated reader might have known is that of Pausanias who, in the *Description of Greece* (c. AD 150), mentions the story during his account of Boeotia. Of a particular spring, he writes: 'They say that Narcissus looked into this water, and not understanding that he saw his own reflection, unconsciously fell in love with himself, and died of love at the spring'. But, he adds briskly, 'it is utter stupidity to imagine that a man old enough to fall in love was incapable of distinguishing a man from a man's reflection'. Although refreshingly honest, this is not a dimension of the myth that its later inheritors have tended to emphasise. More suggestive is Pausanias' claim that there existed in an alternative, 'less popular' version in which Narcissus had a twin sister with whom he fell in love, and that when she died he pined away over the spring 'imagining that he saw, not his own reflection, but the likeness of his sister'.[3] Oscar Wilde may have been thinking of the way this passage puts an unexpected spin on the familiar story when he told his version in which the river itself, stricken with grief after the death of Narcissus, confesses: 'I loved him [. . .] because, when he hung over me, I saw the reflection of my own beauty in his eyes.'[4]

In the case of Echo, the alternative account in Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe* (late 2nd or early 3rd century AD) is notably different from that in Ovid. As Daphnis tells the story, Echo was the daughter of a Nymph, who 'sang with the Muses' and 'shunned all males, humans and gods alike, liking her maidenhood'. The god Pan, 'being jealous of her music and unsuccessful at winning her beauty,' caused shepherds and goatherds to tear her apart 'like dogs or wolves', and to scatter her limbs, 'still singing, over all the earth'. 'As a favor to Nymphs', writes Longus, 'Earth hid her limbs and preserved their music, and by the will of the Muses, she has a voice and imitates everything just as that girl once did. . .'. For Longus the story of Echo bleeds into that of Orpheus, her dismembered body-parts still singing. His Echo, again like Orpheus, is a musician who plays 'the syrinx and the pipes' and sings 'tunes for the lyre, tunes for the cithara, every kind of song'.[5] Phillip Cavendish locates the importance of the Longus version of Echo, and its refractions in later Greek and Latin pastoral verse, in 'the way in which it emphasises the enigmatic, musical and divine qualities

of Echo's voice'.[6] As a figure of the poet-singer, she is also a figure of the female artist whose high vocation precludes the love of men. These elements, filtered through later traditions, surface in Victorian allusions to the myth, as I shall suggest.[7]

But Ovid's remains the model of the story for the Victorians, which is hardly surprising since, as Norman Vance argues, despite 'the deep shadow Homer and revitalised Greek scholarship cast over almost all Latin poetry in this period' Ovid remained 'a common starting-point for the study of Latin poetry and part of the general current of thought and feeling' through the nineteenth century.[8] In many of the most iconic Victorian representations of the tale, however, the complex sequence of events in the *Metamorphoses* is flattened, or telescoped, into a single composite encounter. Visual art, which deals in single moments of time, registers this habit particularly clearly. In John William Waterhouse's painting 'Echo and Narcissus' (1903), for example, the whole story is revealed in an emblematic tableau including both Echo and Narcissus at the same moment. But *what* moment is unclear: not their first meeting, since Narcissus is already enraptured by his image in the pool; yet it isn't clearly their second meeting either, since Narcissus shows no sign of bodily wastage, and Echo is bodily too (her corporality is emphasised, in fact)—far from the ghostly shade who repeats the dying boy's last words. She looks at him with a glance which is difficult to read, perhaps the 'pity' with which the *bodiless* Echo regarded the transfixed and dying Narcissus, but also with the flushed cheek of the *bodily* Echo who looked at Narcissus with sexual desire. There are also symbolic narcissi blowing by the bank which, in Ovid, do not come into existence except through the transformational death of Narcissus. But of course the visual logic of this painting isn't narrative at all, but diagrammatic. Echo to the left, Narcissus to the right: the painting offers two versions of hopeless love, two forms of fruitless absorption, and says 'compare and contrast'.[9] Ovid's narrative is not ignored so much as collapsed in visually interesting ways: the river into which Narcissus gazes, for instance, suggests the onward movement of time and, leading the eye back into the painting and hence figuratively back into the past, recalls the story of Liriope's rape in and by the river-god.

What Waterhouse certainly doesn't try to do is show them as a couple, even a failed one. Solomon J. Solomon's 'Echo and Narcissus' (1895) gives the 'and' of the title a different implication by pressing the figures together in a frustrated non-embrace, Echo hopelessly attempting to distract Narcissus's gaze with her low-cut décolletage. A brief look at these paintings side by side suggests some uses the late Victorian imagination found for the Ovidian tale, as a stylised, quasi-symbolist meditation on solipsism and non-consummation, or as a nod—sexually knowing, titillating, or moralising—towards contemporary patterns of

gender and desire. Echo's pursuit of Narcissus, and Narcissus's rejection of Echo in favour of his own beauty, are shot through with anxious connotations of homosexuality and promiscuity. Both Solomon's and Waterhouse's depictions of the story were painted within twenty years of Freud's paper 'On Narcissism' (1914) which would confirm the association of the Narcissus story with both homosexuality and a kind of primitive megalomania, an 'over-estimation of the power of [. . .] wishes and mental acts'.[10] Narcissus, withdrawing from Echo's advances in Solomon's painting, teeters over the edge of the water in a way that looks physically unstable, his self-involvement figured as a form of doomed hubris. In pulling away he looks almost like he might be standing up to go, faintly recalling Holman Hunt's 'The Awakening Conscience' (1853): but the viewer quickly registers that Narcissus is actually stretching to get a better view of his reflection.

In Edward Carpenter's 'Narcissus' (1873) the boy's story is re-cast in a similar vein to Solomon, as an allegory of sexual awakening and desire. For Carpenter, the radical defender of 'homogenic love', the implications of that sexuality have a particular charge.[11] Narcissus is emphasised as the embodiment of unrealised youthful sexual potential—'in those night-black eyes / Lay undiscovered realms of rich surprise'.[12] More surprising, perhaps, is the recasting of Echo from the figure of human pathos we encounter in Ovid, to a woman justly punished for her provocations:

> . . .very cold her mien
> Yet by a sad and distant smile, star-keen,
> At times transpierced; her step assured and swift,
> As on her task through windswept chasm and rift
> She plied white feet [. . .]
> Unseen of man she dwelt. No mortal eye
> Had looked upon her life; yet to descry
> Her strange and tameless beauty many a one
> Had left the high warm uplands of the Sun,
> And passed into those caverns cold as grave,
> And perished in the fathomless dark wave.
> For all day long with high and mocking note
> She teased the merry shepherds when they smote
> Their palms together, through them hooting shrill
> In jubilant reply from hill to hill.
> And when they sang, it was her wanton joy
> Unto their words to render answer coy;
> Till one at last, from ruddy mien and rude,
> Would grow lovesick, and leave his wonted food
> Untouched [. . .][13]

In this account, Echo's inability to utter more than the last words spoken by others, rather than being a curse under which she suffers, is read as a kind of teasing tipping over into mockery. Her 'wanton joy' is 'to render answer coy' to the shepherds whose lovesickness she cultivates with apparent callousness. Carpenter reworks the Ovidian story here so that Echo does not withdraw to the rocks and caverns only after being spurned by Narcissus, but already, on first encounter, delights in loitering in a cavernous lair into which the poor boy unhappily stumbles. Carpenter transposes to Echo ('this cold, fantastic, fickle maid'[14]) many of the qualities of Narcissus in the Ovidian tradition, and the disdain for love which is Narcissus's crime becomes Echo's. Carpenter's version hints at the tradition of Longus, emphasising her virginity and her retreat from a world of sexual (heterosexual) possibility into 'those caverns cold as grave' (the grave's a fine and private place). There is a dark anticipation suggestive of Longus's story, too, in the hinted violence of the rejected shepherds ('they smote / Their palms together').

Yet the virginity that, in Longus, is presented as integrity ('liking her maidenhood'[15]) is seen here through a filter of prurient aggression in which Echo is shown as courting her own destruction by her sexual provocativeness. Carpenter transposes to Echo many of the characteristics of Narcissus in the Ovidian tradition, including his aggressively prideful disdain for erotic suitors: 'in loud and mocking accents she made answer'. The poem's misogyny lies close to its surface: her loudness, her 'shrill hooting', is repeatedly emphasised, blending a good-time vulgarity with her frigid virginity. In Carpenter's re-telling, the story becomes one of Echo's hubris, not Narcissus's. As in the *Metamorphoses* she chases him, but in a departure from Ovid finds him sleeping, and sings a love-lyric over him (which makes clear that she *can* utter more than a few words, that her 'answer' in 'loud and mocking accents' was not what we thought). This wakes Narcissus, in punishment for which assault on his privacy the gods cause her to waste away to a disembodied voice: she teases him for a week but finally dies altogether, sinking into the blue water of a well. Narcissus, looking after her, catches sight of himself in the water and is overcome with love.

Carpenter's 'Narcissus' exemplifies one of the essentially Victorian uses of myth, as a device for oblique articulation of the unspeakable. In the context of gay Victorians this has been written about thoughtfully by, among others, Linda Dowling and Graham Robb.[16] But the phenomenon goes beyond a queer subculture: Simon Goldhill, in *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*, considers how paintings of near-naked working-class models could be rendered artistically legitimate by the appendage of a classical title in the art of a Waterhouse or an Alma-Tadema, classical dress for modern undress.[17] The significance of this for poetry

is not so much to expose myth as a fig-leaf for Victorian sexuality as to suggest that the Victorians' textual engagement with myth was conducted at the boundary of the spoken and the unspoken.[18] From a literary-historical point of view, the most interesting lines of Carpenter's 'Narcissus' are those which describe his death:

> And on Narcissus fell the fair nymph's ban;
> For while within the waters he did scan
> Some dreamworld wonder, in that lake-born land
> Dimly discerning his own image stand,
> He knew it not; but deemed that some fair maid
> Upon the nether shadow-marge delayed,
> And in love-cravings for that unattained
> Fanciful beauty, his own beauty waned
> And wasted with desire unsatisfied;
> Whereof at length himself had surely died,
> But that the Gods took pity in that hour
> And so transformed him to the fashion of a flower.[19]

Carpenter's poem plays a well-established game in nineteenth-century poetry: that of glancing sideways, at crucial moments of allusion, towards other myths or mythical possibilities. Notice that in the space of about ten lines, Carpenter takes us from Narcissus's first sight of his own image in the water to his death, almost a hundred lines in Ovid. We don't need elaboration, partly because Narcissus's pain is de-emphasised in favour of stressing his perfection, but also because we know this part of the story already. The image of Narcissus bent over the water's edge is part of the framing cultural knowledge we're meant to bring to the poem. What we don't expect is the suggestion that Narcissus sees 'some fair maid / Upon the nether shadow-marge delayed.' The Cambridge-educated Carpenter may have in mind Pausanias' alternative version, in which Narcissus mistakes his image for that of his dead sister, although this back-story is not established in the poem. And Carpenter can also be understood as revelling in the addition of a detail that places a respectable heterosexual façade over the myth while, in the same gesture, introducing a queer view of the boy as an effeminised focus of sexual desire.

Carpenter may also be echoing the moment in Book I of Keats's *Endymion* (1818) when Endymion sees the vision of Cynthia revealed to him in the reflections in a well:

> Beyond the matron-temple of Latona,
> Which we should see but for these darkening boughs,
> Lies a deep hollow […]
> Some moulder'd steps lead into this cool cell,

> Far as the slabbed margin of a well […]
> And there in strife no burning thoughts to heed,
> I'd bubble up the water through a reed;
> So reaching back to boy-hood: make me ships
> Of moulted feathers, touchwood, alder chips,
> With leaves stuck in them; and the Neptune be
> Of their petty ocean. Oftener, heavily,
> When love-lorn hours had left me less a child,
> I sat contemplating the figures wild
> Of o'er-head clouds melting the mirror through.
> Upon a day, while thus I watch'd, by flew
> A cloudy Cupid, with his bow and quiver;
> So plainly character'd, no breeze would shiver
> The happy chance: so happy, I was fain
> To follow it upon the open plain,
> And, therefore, was just going; when, behold!
> A wonder, fair as any I have told—
> The same bright face I tasted in my sleep,
> Smiling in the clear well. My heart did leap
> Through the cool depth. [20]

Just as, moments before Narcissus' death, Carpenter teases us with the glancing suggestion that he might turn into Endymion (that is, the male version of Sleeping Beauty, what he would have been but for Echo's singing), here Keats fills his account of Endymion with pregnant suggestion that Endymion might become Narcissus. Already in line fifteen of his poem he has placed the word 'daffodils' in a position where it casts its symbolic shadow. Now the poem is located in a private space, a well fringed with dense foliage, whose 'darkening boughs' recall the setting of the Ovidian *fons*: *gramen erat circa, quod proximus umor alebat, / silvaque sole locum passura tepescere nullo* (411-12), 'grass grew all around the edge, fed by water near, and a coppice that prevented the sun from ever warming the spot'. Keats has the young Endymion 'love-lorn', contemplating the images of clouds in the water described ominously as a 'mirror', and when he sees a face in the water the poem's line breaks and marks of suspension playfully maintain a doubt about whose face it will be.

As Norman Vance observes, 'the difficulty in assessing the significance of Ovid in the nineteenth century is that one can never see him on his own. His influence is nearly always mediated…'.[21] Keats's poem is called *Endymion*, and so in a sense can safely flirt with the myth of Narcissus, calling it into view without focusing on it, just as Carpenter's 'Narcissus' can cast sidelong glances at Endymion. This kind of mythic allusion is a matter of nuance, implication, uncanny familiarity, and nineteenth century poetry gravitates surprisingly often to the Echo and Narcissus story—even when that story is not its stated theme—as a *locus*

classicus of speaking and not-speaking, half-articulation, eloquent absence. *Endymion* itself looks, in this respect, to Shelley's *Alastor* (1816), in which the story of Narcissus presents a kind of trap which the Poet must avoid, and which is at the same time a close analogue to the path of solitude he must choose. Though Echo and Narcissus are nowhere named in the poem, the imaginative identification of the Poet as a tired and aging Narcissus is explicit:

> Hither the Poet came. His eyes beheld
> Their own wan light through the reflected lines
> Of his thin hair, distinct in the dark depth
> Of that still fountain; as the human heart,
> Gazing in dreams over the gloomy grave,
> Sees its own treacherous likeness there.[22]

Critics have noted the place of the Echo and Narcissus story in *Alastor*,[23] but it has not always been emphasised that the presence of the myth in that poem is as much a matter of suggestion and ambient setting as of similarity of characters. Some sixty lines before the passage above, the presence of the myth has been already embedded into the landscape:

> Where the embowering trees recede, and leave
> A little space of green expanse, the cove
> Is closed by meeting banks, whose yellow flowers
> For ever gaze on their own drooping eyes,
> Reflected in the crystal calm. [. . .]
> The Poet longed
> To deck with their bright hues his withered hair,
> But on his heart its solitude returned,
> And he forbore.[24]

The Poet's forbearance here is an ethically-charged moment which moves the argument of the poem forward by refining, in an important way, the kind of solitude the poem is talking about: that is, a self-sufficiency which must stay distinct from mere Narcissistic *self-involvement*. At the same time, that Narcissism needs to be present-but-cancelled, a significant absence and echo in the poem's world. Shelley, like Keats, signals the Ovidian story by setting rather than naming: the 'embowering trees', the 'cove' the 'banks', and the 'yellow flowers' place the reader in the world of the Echo and Narcissus story without explicitly telling that story.

Many critics have thought of the Victorian poets as bereaved by the deaths of Shelley, Keats, and Byron, sadly unconvinced of their Romantic vocation as 'unacknowledged legislators' -- writers for whom the act of poetic utterance itself might seem like talking into

an echoing space. Eric Griffiths, in *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry*, diagnoses in sharply funny form the awkward one-sidedness of the opening of Tennyson's *Maud* (1855):

> I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
> Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
> The red-ribbed ledgers drip with a silent horror of blood,
> And Echo there, whatever is asked her, answers 'Death'.[25]

To these lines, writes Griffiths, which explicitly raise the question of asking and answering, 'Nothing can be answered [. . .]. What could you say—'Oh, really, how fascinating' or 'Yes, yes, so do I, so do I'?'[26] *Maud*'s opening setting in 'the dreadful hollow. . .' recalls the Ovidian grotto, as moderated through the Shelleyan-Keatsian tradition, while at the same time recalling the various kinds of hollowness (including, for Griffiths, the hollowness of awkward small-talk) which generate echoes. 'Echo' herself, capitalised and personified, appears in the poem as a distorting and distorted presence: answering 'death' to whatever is asked her, even if, like 'heath', the echo rings false. The subtextual presence of Echo and Narcissus in the poem has often been noted:[27]

> My life has crept so long on a broken wing
> Through cells of madness, haunts of horror and fear,
> That I may come to be grateful at last for a little thing:
> My mood is changed, for it fell at the time of year
> When the face of night is fair on the dewy downs,
> And the shining daffodil dies, and the Charioteer
> And starry Gemini hang down like glorious crowns
> Over Orion's grave low down in the west [. . .] (580)

The speaker's 'cells of madness' here (think of the 'cool cell' of *Endymion*) follows the example of Shelley and Keats by signalling the setting of the myth without narrating it. Tennyson altered, in draft, 'bright Narcissus' to 'shining daffodil' (as also in the earlier line 'The shining daffodil dead, and Orion low in his grave' (526) of which this is itself an echo): *Maud* takes its place in a tradition of poems which invoke the Echo and Narcissus story only to withdraw from it, the withdrawal as significant as the evocation and itself part of the way the allusion works.

The story of Echo and Narcissus is the kind of myth which, presented *in* poetry, becomes almost irresistibly a myth *of* poetry, a way of imagining (among other things) speech, address, the poetic 'gaze', and the function of rhyme. As Martin Danahay has observed, we might expect the tale to speak vividly to the nineteenth century, 'given

Romantic and Victorian concerns about solipsism, and the formulation of such programs as Carlyle's "anti-self-consciousness" doctrine'.[28] Ovid's tale offered Victorian poets a way of conceptualising the inarticulacy and self-absorption which seemed characteristic of the modern poetic subject as darkly evoked by Matthew Arnold in the 'Preface' to his *Poems* of 1853: 'the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity [of the Greek genius] have disappeared [. . .] the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement, of Hamlet and of Faust'.[29] (This change might be epitomised by the move from Shelley's repeated play in *Alastor* on 'involved' to Tennyson's coinage 'self-involved'.) Arnold explicitly opposes modern poetry to 'the Greek genius', though the terms of the contrast also builds into his position an anxious comparison which yokes nineteenth-century verse to the classical past it fails to resemble.

Something of this dynamic runs through many Victorian encounters with the Echo and Narcissus myth, which glance at something else unseen or unsaid, as in the following sonnet, entitled 'The Love of Narcissus' (1896):

> Like him who met his own eyes in the river,
> The poet trembles at his own long gaze
> That meets him through the changing nights and days
> From out great Nature; all her waters quiver
> With his fair image facing him for ever;
> The music that he listens to betrays
> His own heart to his ears; by trackless ways
> His wild thoughts tend to him in long endeavour.
>
> His dreams are far among the silent hills;
> His vague voice calls him from the darkened plain
> With winds at night; strange recognition thrills
> His lonely heart with piercing love and pain;
> He knows his sweet mirth in the mountain rills.
> His weary tears that touch him with the rain.[30]

Goethe in *Elective Affinities* remarked that 'man is a true Narcissus: he makes the whole world his mirror'.[31] For this poem, 'the love of Narcissus' is the poet's self-love which reflects the whole of nature back at him with his own face: 'all her waters quiver / With his fair image facing him for ever'. Nature, feminised, is passive in the exchange: indeed, as one might expect from a poem entitled 'Narcissus', it's all about *him*. 'He' is everywhere in this poem. Across its fourteen lines, the pronoun 'he' in its various forms appears fourteen times. This masculinising of the poet is deliberate and—read through the venerable masculine

baggage of the sonnet tradition—significant, but the poem plays with our natural tendency to conflate 'the poet' with *this* poet.

The author is Alice Meynell: where *he*, the allegorical 'poet' is everywhere, *she*, the actual poet, appears in the sonnet as an implied watcher, looking at Narcissus, disembodied—as in Ovid, only voice. What looks, on first reading, like a poem about Narcissus turns out, on further consideration, to be a poem which attends to Echo, in which the framing turns out to be more significant than what we see centre stage. Meynell's poem can be seen, like *Maud*, as imagining the Echo myth as much through absence as narration. It engages thoughtfully with one of the features that makes Ovid's story so poetically fecund: the way it can flip back and forth like a duck-rabbit between a fable that is oriented towards the visual imagination (about gazing) and the aural (about speech, agency, and repetition). While it looks at Narcissus, it sounds like Echo: in its auditory fabric the poem employs a distinctly poetic form of echoing, contained or constrained rhyme: the more claustrophobic version of the Petrarchan sestet, *cdcdcd*, has been preferred to the more aurally roomy *cdecde*. The poem never wanders very far without coming back, and it is tempting to say that the rhyme on 'plain', 'pain', and 'rain' is Tennysonian, picking up an intertextual echo of the refrain of 'pain', 'again', 'brain', 'vain', 'wane', 'twain' etc. around which so many of the concerns of *In Memoriam* are sonically ordered.

Meynell's sonnet, and Carpenter's 'Narcissus', are unusual among Victorian poems in referring to Narcissus by name.[32] More typically the reader stumbles into the world of the story without hearing it named or recited, even when the poem seems very remote from the Ovidian tradition, as in *In Memoriam* XIX (1850):

> The Danube to the Severn gave
>   The darkened heart that beat no more;
>   They laid him by the pleasant shore,
> And in the hearing of the wave.
>
> There twice a day the Severn fills;
>   The salt sea-water passes by,
>   And hushes half the babbling Wye,
> And makes a silence in the hills.
>
> The Wye is hushed nor moved along,
>   And hushed my deepest grief of all,
>   When filled with tears that cannot fall,
> I brim with sorrow drowning song.
>
> The tide flows down, the wave again

  Is vocal in its wooded walls
  My deeper anguish also falls,
And I can speak a little then. (364)

Ovid's *fons* is a tricky word to translate: it is hard to imagine the surfaces suggested by many of its English equivalents, such as 'spring' or 'fountain', remaining sufficiently still to present the mirroring surface necessary. In the single most famous narcissus (not Narcissus) poem of the century, Wordsworth both conjured the myth into play and at the same time cancelled it by pressing home this important literalism of detail:

I wandered lonely as a Cloud
That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of dancing Daffodils;
Beside the Lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:— […][33]

'Dancing . . . dancing . . . danced': the inert, prone Narcissus of myth that is inevitably called to mind by the presence of daffodils alongside water is radically discontinuous with the lively narcissi of the natural world;[34] in the same way, Wordsworth's lake is distanced from Ovid's *fons* by its dancing mobility, which prevents it from becoming Narcissus' mirror.[35] Dante Gabriel Rossetti does something similar in his first 'Willowwood' sonnet (1870), which introduces another framing setting redolent of the Echo and Narcissus myth ('I sat with Love upon a woodside well, / Leaning across the water, I and he [. . .]'), only to muddy the waters, literally and figuratively, such that 'Love'—who is identified with, or located in, the speaker's own image—can be transformed into the female beloved:

Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there,
   Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.[36]

Christina Rossetti's 'An Echo from Willowwood' elaborates on the same conceit. She pictures 'he' and 'she' both gazing into the mirroring pool, each look at the reflection of the other, until

A sudden ripple made the faces flow

One moment joined, to vanish out of reach:
So those hearts joined, and ah! were parted so.[37]

In the hands of both Rossettis, Narcissus is evoked to be rewritten or rejected: a myth is consciously reflected, only to be distorted and transformed by the ripples of the unreliable mirror.

Bodies of water, in certain circumstances, bring Narcissus' story to mind symbolically even as the realistic imagination calls into question their reflective capacity. In *In Memoriam* XIX, Tennyson allows the river to catch a reflection of Narcissus while remaining, physically and literally, a troubled water. Imagining Hallam's return from the Danube to the Severn, *In Memoriam* XIX transfers the painful business of speaking and listening from the human subject to the environment that forms its backdrop: 'the hearing of the wave', and of course the 'babbling Wye' which, like Echo in the landscape, gives voice to the desperate question 'Why?' that so often touches the poem. Once conscious of Echo and Narcissus, the Tennysonian speaker's balance of inarticulacy and speech, impotence and witness, acquires a new sort of meaning. The wave 'vocal in its wooded walls' takes on something of the narcissistic claustrophobia translated from Ovid by Shelley and Keats, and the rising of the Severn into the Wye, that 'makes a silence in the hills' represses momentarily the Echoic voices of the landscape. The formal Echo here (the *abba* of the stanzas sounding a continual return) reads as elegiac, the voice of the mourning Echo who, only voice, gives witness to the dying Narcissus, and who, like Tennyson, can only speak 'a little'.

Christina Rossetti's poem 'Echo' (1854) may recall this canto of *In Memoriam*:

O dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter-sweet,
[…] Where souls brim-full of love abide and meet;
Where thirsting longing eyes
Watch the slow door
That opening, letting in, lets out no more.

Yet come to me in dreams, that I may live
My very life again though cold in death;
Come back to me in dreams, that I may give
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath:
Speak low, lean low,
As long ago, my love, how long ago.[38]

Rossetti's 'brim-full' and Tennyson's 'brim' both imagine grief welling up, and the grieving heart or soul as a *fons* unbearably full. At the same time the poem's 'speaking silence' locates the lyrical subject in a kind of emptiness waiting to be filled by, and animated by, the absent

loved one ('come to me. . . that I may live'). The scene evoked by the poem is less explicit in its allusion to the myth than 'An Echo from Willowwood': it leaves room for doubt about whether the speaking 'I' should be understood as uttered (or uttered inwardly) by Echo herself, or by a lyrical speaker who compares herself to Echo, or merely as a lyrical 'I' presented beneath the sign 'Echo' but otherwise unidentified. The mythological reference in the title is nowhere clarified in the poem, and even there remains ambiguous, since a title is capitalised as a matter of convention and thus makes no distinction between 'echo' and 'Echo'. The falling-away, in the early century, of the convention of capitalising the first letter of nouns *passim* is an important background condition for any discussion of nineteenth-century poetic allusion. By the time of Thomas Moore's 'Echo', for example, in the eighth book of *Irish Melodies* (1820), this change is underway, and doubts about the precise limits of allusion are partly resolvable by appealing to typography:

> How sweet the answer Echo makes
>   To music at night,
> When, roused by lute or horn, she wakes,
> And far away, o'er lawns and lakes,
>   Goes answering light. […][39]

The mythical implication of 'Echo' is underscored by the pronoun 'she', so we can hear in the rhymes of this stanza the ghost of an Ovidian dialogue, with 'light' readable either as a poetic adverb ('goes answering lightly') or an Echoic response to 'night' ('goes answering: "light"'). The following stanza, though, capitalises Love which, while it may call to mind Cupid or 'Amor', effects a slight retrospective downgrading of the capital letter on 'Echo' from a marker of a personal name to a personified concept. No doubt this reflects an abstracting and intellectualising shift in the poetic status and treatment of myth, and it is certainly a fact with consequences for their respective poetic afterlives that, whereas Narcissus becomes a flower, Echo becomes a concept. Nonetheless this typographical shift of practice has consequences, over succeeding generations, for poetic voice. In 1820 the capitalising of 'Echo' has become a self-conscious act of naming only recently, and Moore writes with a less fully-realised awareness of the shift than Tennyson, for whom the placement of 'Echo' as opposed to 'echo' early in *Maud* is an effect that strikes the eye with conspicuous force and a sense of allusive complicity.[40]

Tennyson's allusion is multiply complicit, not only with the classical Echo, but with her later echoes. Most prominent among these is the Renaissance Echo poem, in which Echo—part person, part phenomenon—finds, in the closing syllables of an original statement or question, a kind of response or answer. For example, George Herbert:

But are there cares and business with the pleasure?
Echo. *Leisure.*
Light, joy, and leisure; but shall they persever?
Echo. *Ever.*[41]

That this genre was recognized in the nineteenth century is indicated by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use, in 'A Vision of Poets' (1844), of an epigraph from *Britannia's Issue* by the seventeenth-century poet William Browne. Thus recycled, it sets in train a number of questions about female poetic creativity on which Barrett Browning's poem will expand:

O Sacred Essence, lighting me this hour,
How may I lightly stile thy great power?
Echo. Power.
Power! but of whence? under the greenwood spraye?
Or liv'st in Heave? saye.
Echo. In Heavens aye.
In Heavens aye! tell, may I it obtayne
By alms, by fasting, prayer,—by paine?
Echo. By paine.
Show me the paine, it shall be undergone:
I to my end will still go on.
Echo. Go on.[42]

The ramifications of this epigraph are various: the enclosed rhyming scheme of *aaa*, *bbb*. . .; the questioning and reaffirmation of poetic power; the consideration of who lives 'in Heaven's eye', and by what suffering immortality might be purchased. And the lady of the poem, who lives to 'crown all poets to their worth' (216) might be thought to represent a version of Echo, in that she lends her poetic creativity in all cases except one (Sappho) to the affirmation of male poetic utterance, sometimes repeating in her praise words already heard in the mouths of others, such as

There Shakespeare, on whose forehead climb
The crowns o'the world: O eyes sublime
With tears and laughter of all time! (219)

which contains its own echo of Jonson's 'not of an age, but for all time'.

The formal Echo poem in the Renaissance style was well enough known in the nineteenth century for poets to make a joke of it, as in Edward Lear's Indian nonsense lyric 'The Cummerbund' (1874) in which Echo pops up at one moment as part mourner, part heckler, and part solution for the lack of a rhyming word:

> They sought in vain for even a bone
> Respectfully to bury, –
> They said, – 'Hers was a dreadful fate!'
> (And Echo answered 'Very.')[43]

This comic Echo, of course, knowingly misapplies the rules of the Ovidian game (though Lear did write one of the greatest echoic poems of the century in 'The Dong with a Luminous Nose'[44]). Many Victorian poets were familiar with, and clearly drawn to, the Renaissance Echo poem, but few explicitly emulated it. Victorian Echo poems typically follow a different pattern, withdrawing from the limelight into the wild places, the shadows of implication and suggestion, turning on the relationship of setting to framing knowledge. In a telling paradox, the Victorian Echo poem that comes closest to advertising itself as such, Hopkins' 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo' (1882), also represents yet a further shift away from the Ovidian and classical pattern, into a new level of sonic saturation that is experienced not as allusion, or as a model of poetics, but as theology: in turn as emptiness and fullness, as despair and as grace.

Although his subtitle, 'Maidens' Song from St. Winefred's Well' gives a female identity to the 'Echoes' of the title and casts a glance sideways at the *fons* of Ovid, the poem's phonic organisation is of a denser and more abstract order than in any of the works discussed above:

> So be beginning, be beginning to despair.
> O there's none; no no no there's none:
> Be beginning to despair, to despair,
> Despair, despair, despair, despair.[45]

The run on 'Despair, despair, despair, despair' calls to mind the 'wild echo' (not Echo) of Tennyson's song from *The Princess*, 'The splendour falls on castle walls', with its fall into sheer, vertiginous repetition: 'dying, dying, dying' (265). And there is something narcissistic in the obsessive fixation upon the echo of one's own voice. Against this, the shift from 'Leaden' to 'Golden Echo' is both an alchemist's transmutation, and a mythological return to

Ovid's prelapsarian age. To the Leaden Echo's sonic narcissism, the response of the Golden Echo is a redeemed Narcissus, who can be released from his own reflection by returning his beauty to his creator:

> [. . .] fastened with the tenderest truth
> To its own best being and its loveliness of youth: it is an everlastingness of, O it is an all youth!
> Come then, your ways and airs and looks, locks, maidengear, gallantry and gaiety and grace [. . .]
> Resign them, sign them, seal them, send them, motion them with breath,
> And with sighs soaring, soaring síghs, deliver
> Them; beauty-in-the-ghost, deliver it, early now, long before death
> Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's self and beauty's giver.[46]

John Ruskin wrote in 1864 to the classicist and clergyman Richard St John Tyrwhitt that 'I've the greatest possible desire to "believe" in Apollo and Diana—and in Neseus [*sic*], [. . .] and I do, very nearly; so that just a touch of strong will will do it . . .'.[47] Hopkins's poem is one form such a 'touch of strong will' might take: as *interpretatio Christiana.* The injunction to 'give beauty back' to God reorders the Narcissus myth into an image of the Beatific Vision, with the human soul as the reflection, the *imago Dei*, gazing up at its original. The mirror of Narcissus becomes the reciprocal gaze of the soul and its maker: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known.'[48]

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NOTES

[1] In-text line numbers reference Ovid, *Metamorphoses Books 1-8*, ed. and trans. Frank Justus Miller, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge Mass.,, 1977). My English glosses stay close to Miller's 1916 translation but lightly modernize his diction.

[2] *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* mentions only two other sources, both Greek, both later than Ovid. The first is Conon's *Diegeseis* (1st century AD), now lost but summarized in the *Bibliotheca* of the Byzantine Patriarch Photius (9th c.), and the same in all essentials as Ovid. The second is Pausanius's *Description of Greece*, on which see following note. 'Narcissus (1)' in Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth (eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1996), p. 1026.

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[3] *Description of Greece* IX, xxxi, 7-8, in Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Vol. IV: Books 8.22-10 (Arcadia, Boeotia, Phocis and Ozolian Locri*), ed. and trans. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge Mass., 1935), p. 311.
[4] Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (1946), p. 217.
[5] *Daphnis and Chloe* III, 23, in Longus and Xenophon of Ephesus, *Daphnis and Chloe. Anthia and Habrocomes*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), pp. 131-3.
[6] Philip Cavendish, 'Poetry as Metamorphosis: Aleksandr Pushkin's "Ekho" and the Reshaping of the Echo Myth', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 78.3 (2000), 439-62: 446.
[7] On the post-classical history of Echo, see John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley, Calif.,, 1981).
[8] Norman Vance, 'Ovid and the nineteenth century', in Charles Martindale (ed.) *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on literature and art from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century* (Cambridge, 1988), 215-231, p. 215.
[9] On the 'diagrammatic' priorities of paintings against and alongside their narrative priorities, see Tom Lubbock, *Great Works: 50 Paintings Explored* (2011), 101-3.
[10] Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. xiv, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1957; repr. 2001), 67-102, p. 75.
[11] On Carpenter's life see Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (2008), and on the background of *Homogenic Love* in particular, pp. 179-95.
[12] Edward Carpenter, *Narcissus and Other Poems* (1873), p. 4.
[13] Carpenter, *Narcissus*, pp. 9-10.
[14] Carpenter, *Narcissus*, p. 10.
[15] φιλοῦσα τὴν παρθενίαν, Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, p. 132. Henderson is right, I think, to prefer 'liking' to 'loving', with its potentially negative association of 'self-love'. Longus's Echo is not Narcissus.
[16] Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), *passim*; Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century* (2003), pp. 142-4, 178-9, 244-5.
[17] Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Princeton, N.J., 2011), pp. 23-64.
[18] Perhaps Ovid in particular, in light of his dubious respectability: see Vance, 'Ovid and the nineteenth century', pp. 216-9, and *passim*.
[19] Carpenter, *Narcissus*, p. 18.
[20] John Keats, *Endymion*, II. 131-7, in *John Keats: The Major Works*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford, 1990), pp. 82-3.
[21] Vance, 'Ovid and the nineteenth century', p. 215.
[22] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Alastor: or, The Spirit of Solitude*, ll. 469-74, in *Shelley: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson 2nd edn (Oxford, 1970), p. 23.
[23] On this see Susan Fischman, '"Like the Sound of His Own Voice": Gender, Audition, and Echo in *Alastor*', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 43 (1994), 141-69, which makes a persuasive case as well as summarizing much earlier work in this vein.
[24] Shelley, *Alastor*, ll. 404-8, 412-15.
[25] *Maud*, I. i, ll. 1-4, in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (1989), pp. 516-7. Future references to Tennyson are to this edition, given in the text.
[26] Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 1989), p. 158.
[27] Noted, e.g., by W. E. Buckler, *The Victorian Imagination* (Brighton, 1980), p. 226.
[28] Martin Danahay, 'Mirrors of Masculine Desire: Narcissus and Pygmalion in Victorian Representation', *Victorian Poetry* 32.1 (1994), 35-54: 35.
[29] Matthew Arnold, 'Preface' to *Poems* (1853), in *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (1965), p. 591.
[30] Alice Meynell, 'Sonnet: The Love of Narcissus', in *Poems*, 4th edn (1896), p. 46.
[31] Cited in Danahay, 'Mirrors', p. 35.
[32] Surprisingly so, says Danahay, 'Mirrors', p. 35.
[33] 'I wandered lonely as a Cloud' (1807), in *21st Century Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2010), p. 265.
[34] Or perhaps he is given a liveliness in death greater than in his life. In another instance of the paradoxical nature of this allusion, to see Wordsworth's poem as emphasizing its newly naturalistic, non-classicizing style of poetry by distancing itself from the myth is, by the same token, to put the myth into play, present but cancelled.
[35] Wordsworth was insistent on this point. To George Beaumont, who passed on a friend's criticism of the lyric about the 'Daffodils reflected in the water', Wordsworth replied: 'What shall we think of criticism or judgement founded upon and exemplified by a Poem which must have been so inattentively perused? My Language is precise [. . .] ask your Friend how it is possible for flowers to be reflected in water where there are waves.' See

The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Oxford, 1969–70), i. 194. I am grateful to Matthew Bevis for showing me an advance draft of his forthcoming monograph *Wordsworth's Fun* which brought this letter to my attention.
[36] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Sonnet XLIV ("Willowwood")', in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven, 2003), p. 149.
[37] Christina Rossetti, 'An Echo from Willowwood', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. R. W. Crump and Betty S. Flowers (2005), p. 585.
[38] Christina Rossetti, 'Echo', in *The Complete Poems*, p. 40.
[39] Thomas Moore, *The Poetical Works of Thomas Moore* (1891), p. 247.
[40] It might be objected that to attend too closely to the page is to read Moore against the grain of his insistence on the aural and musical character of the *Melodies*, of which his reluctance to separate out the 'lyrics' from the tunes was emblematic. See Matthew Campbell, *Irish Poetry Under the Union* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 34.
[41] George Herbert, *The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater (1995), p. 184.
[42] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1900), p. 215. Subsequent references to Barrett Browning are given in the text to this edition.
[43] Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*, ed. Vivien Noakes (2006), p. 406.
[44] I discuss the 'Dong' as an Echo poem in my *Edward Lear* (Tavistock, 2018), pp. 132-140.
[45] Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (1967), p. 91.
[46] Hopkins, *Poems*, p. 92.
[47] Quoted in Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin* (New Haven, Conn., 2002), pp. 354-5.
[48] 1 Corinthians 13:13 (AV).